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SRI LANKA

TSUNAMI RESPONSE

First Steps: Clearing the Rubble

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Sinhalese and Tamil youth work together to clear rubble and begin to rebuild in Seenigama, in southern Sri Lanka.

PUBLIC DONATION INFORMATION

The best way to help is to make cash contributions to humanitarian organizations working to assist the affected countries.

For a list of organizations accepting donations, please see "Tsunami Relief" at www.usaid.gov or call the Center for International Disaster Information at (703) 276-1914.

For more information on USAID's assistance to the communities affected by the tsunami, visit www.usaid.gov.

YOUTH REMOVE THE RUBBLE

The youth from Seenigama, in southern Sri Lanka, have returned to their homes, or the rubble that is left of them. The damage caused by the tsunami three weeks earlier is so extensive that the fishing village of 325 houses is completely gone. What is not gone is the desire to rebuild.

200 boys and young men from the region are piling broken stone into neat piles, cleaning the private properties from debris, and clearing the area from dangers, such as sharp metal pieces and live electric wires. Clearing a patch of land creates hope – a key to recovering from the disaster.

SINHALESE AND TAMIL VOLUNTEERS WORK TOGETHER

These young men are not alone in their monumental task. A large group of volunteers from the northern districts, unaffected by the tsunami, have arrived to help the locals. Now in Seenigama and the surrounding villages, Sinhalese and Tamils work together undivided by their ethnic and religious differences. Their goal is to clean three villages within one month – an ambitious plan which the men believe they can accomplish.

"Volunteering has created a 'can-do' spirit which reduces fear and insecurity among the locals," explains Zaf Hassim from USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). The \$2.5 million clean-up program was created by OTI and funded by USAID/OFDA to jump-start the recovery process. For their work, the local youth and men get cash to buy food and basic necessities. The volunteers from the unaffected districts receive meals.

Before moving to clean the village of Seenigama, the youth removed debris from three badly damaged schools in the area. These were a part of five OTI rehabilitated schools which opened only two months before the tsunami disaster. In the past, OTI also helped build water systems and bring electric power to the Seenigama community. Now all of that has to be redone.

VILLAGERS MOVE FORWARD WITH THEIR LIVES

The clean-up program encourages locals to move on with their fractured lives. "The wave took my wife and daughter away, but I was able to save my ten-month-old baby," tells a tall man who operates a pick-up truck that carries the rubble away. "I am grieving, but I can't give up." His tired eyes tell about the sleepless nights, but during the day he is contributing to his community.

Despite the tragedy, the young men clearing the rubble are hopeful. "We cannot look back. We must move forward and build the village anew."

While the clean-up of the three villages is going on, the program is expanding to other devastated areas on the southern coast of Sri Lanka. USAID is funding an extensive clean-up of both private and public lands in order to allow the reconstruction of infrastructure and business. The program is joining the forces of locals receiving cash for work, the U.S. marines and the Sri Lankan army.